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ABSTRACT

The New Literacy Studies (NLS) is an approach that places literacy in its wider context of institutional purposes and power relationships. The NLS has been suggested as offering a useful theoretical basis from which to proceed in developing sustainable lifelong learning in relation to literacy. The first of three issues related to this suggestion is the need to develop a more extensive empirical research base on the detail of literacy learning and use in local communities. This research should focus not just on individual learning histories but also on literacy practices within and between groups and communities. The second issue is the need to clarify underpinning notions of learning and knowing (both at the individual and the group level) that are at work in the NLS and how these relate to forms of knowing currently privileged by educational institutions. Notions should be developed of institutional or dominant literacies associated with formal organizations and of vernacular or self-generated literacies that have their origin in the purposes of everyday life. The third issue is the need to pay much more serious attention to the institutional processes whereby "truths" about literacy become translated into policy and practice--the intersection between policy and learning theory. (Contains 23 references.) (YLB)

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Sustainable Literacies and the Ecology of Lifelong Learning

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Introducing The New Literacy Studies

Recent years have seen a paradigm shift in the study of literacy in contemporary societies. The shift is from a psychological or cognitive model of literacy as a set of skills to one which includes the sociocultural practices associated with reading and writing. It is a social and ecological view of literacy rather than a purely psychological one (Barton, 1994). The essence of this approach is that literacy competence and need cannot be understood in terms of absolute levels of skill, but are *relational* concepts, defined by the social and communicative practices with which individuals engage in the various domains of their life world. It sees literacy as historically and socially situated. As Brian Street puts it, it is a shift from literacy as an autonomous gift to be given to people, to an ideological understanding of literacy) which places it in its wider context of institutional purposes and power relationships (see Street, 1995) This approach has come to be known as the New Literacy Studies (NLS).

Those of us working with this new approach advocate a broader understanding of what is included when we talk about literacy, suggesting that we should look beyond texts themselves to what people do with literacy, with whom, where, and how. That is, we focus attention on the cultural practices within which the written word is embedded - the ways in which texts are socially regulated and used. This leads us to consider the differentiated uses of literacy in varying cultural contexts. It lead us to consider not just print literacy but other mass media including visual and oral ways of communicating (see Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996) and especially the way that the use of these media, using both old (print) and new (electronic) technologies, is interlinked. Writing becomes as central as reading, and other ways of interacting with print culture are identified.

The focus shifts from literacy as deficit or lack, something people haven't got, to the many different ways that people engage with literacy, recognising difference and diversity and challenging how these differences are valued within our society. The NLS involves us in looking beyond educational settings to vernacular practices and informal learning, and to the other official settings in which literacies play a key role. Learning does not just take place in classrooms and is not just concerned with methods.

This shift has implications for how we work with literacy. Firstly, we have to recognise that there is not one literacy, but there are many different literacies. What does this mean? As soon as we move away from seeing literacy as simply a set of skills, to viewing it as practices that we are actively engaged with, it becomes obvious that there are many different ways in which reading and writing are used and that people are developing new literacies all the time. In his book "The Social Mind", James Gee talks about how literacies are linked to different discourse communities that we are all part of. These are made up of people, things, characteristic ways of talking, acting, thinking, believing, valuing, interpreting - and reading and writing are an integral part of these activities and ways of being in the world (Gee, 1992). Often, we are not very aware of the rules of the communities we are familiar with, but we become sharply aware of them when we move into a new group or institution that assumes a different set of rules and we may suddenly come to feel like a novice in this new situation.

Another implication of the shift in understanding literacy is that it places at centre stage people's own definitions of literacy because there is no one standard that is valid for everyone, for all time. This means exploring both as teachers our own starting points, and with students their starting points and assumptions about literacy.

Applying new views of literacy within educational practice therefore also means introducing them into professional development, where teachers can address questions of the role of reading and writing in their own lives and how this affects their professional practice.

In sum, then, the New Literacy Studies encourages us to be reflective about the everyday practices that we are all part of, to ask questions, rather than to assume that we already know what literacy is.

Despite the progress in theorising a different approach to literacy, there is still a long way to go in making the NLS credible as an approach within education policy and practice. In a number of countries (including Australia, South Africa and North America) standardised curricula and assessment systems are being introduced in an atmosphere of anxiety about falling literacy standards and the presumed effects of popular culture and the new communication media. These trends move us away from strategies that would be in tune with the NLS. They point backwards to more traditional and prescriptive methods for teaching and learning writing and reading, and attempts to separate print literacy from other media, especially those that prevail in popular cultural forms.

This is true of the new adult basic skills strategy in England and Wales, prompted by the Moser report in 1999 where an increasingly formal and standardised version of ABE is being developed, complete with national testing and a national curriculum for adults that is designed to fit seamlessly with school achievement as part of a National Literacy Strategy (Moser, 1999). These developments in adult education, however, are also taking place within a broader strategy of lifelong learning that I believe promises a different vision of what literacy might be, a vision that is much closer, potentially to the new understandings embodied in the New Literacy Studies. In this paper I will elaborate on this potential for developing sustainable lifelong learning in relation to literacy and suggest that the NLS offers a useful theoretical basis from which to proceed. I will do so by addressing three issues:

(1) The empirical research agenda: the need to develop a more extensive research base on the detail of literacy learning and use in local communities. This research should focus not just on individual learning histories, but also on literacy practices within and between groups and communities

(2) The need to clarify underpinning notions of learning and knowing (both at the individual and the group level) that are at work in the NLS and how these relate to forms of knowing currently priviledged by educational institutions.

(3) The need to pay much more serious attention to the institutional processes whereby "truths" about literacy become translated into policy and practice – the intersection between policy and learning theory

In what follows, I will discuss these three areas starting from the perspectives offered by a recent ethnographic study published with David Barton as "Local Literacies" (Barton and Hamilton, 1998)

Developing an Ethnographic Research Base

The NLS has begun to gather detailed ethnographic data on the ecology of literacy in everyday life. However, we still do not have enough data --either to begin to identify the range of literacies with which people are engaged, or to begin drawing out communalities and varieties of practice across social groupings of different kinds. We are still talking in very general terms about the roles of literacy in society. We have to further deepen and problematise the notion of "community"

This has been the focus of the "Local Literacies" project. The project has been a detailed study of the role of literacy in the everyday lives of people in Lancaster, England, and is reported in Barton & Hamilton 1998 and elsewhere. This was an ESRC-funded project lasting several years. The study used in-depth interviews, complemented by observations, photography and the collection of documents and records. It included a door-to-door survey in one neighbourhood of Lancaster and detailed case studies of people in twelve households in the neighbourhood, observing particular literacy events, and asking people to reflect on their practices. Alongside the case studies were thirty interviews of people in what we called access points for literacy, such as book-shops, libraries and advice centres. There were also interviews of twenty adults who had identified problems with their reading and writing and had been attending courses at the Adult College. More than a year after the main part of the study in a phase called the Collaborative Ethnography project we took back transcripts of interviews and drafts of our interpretative themes to ten of the people for further discussion.

In Lancaster we have explored a small town, within which there are some close-knit, long standing communities with multiple overlapping ties and concerns. There are also groups and individuals whose identities are not so closely anchored to one locality, who come and go and maintain relationships in a number of different "communities" outside of Lancaster. There are enclaves of highly educated and geographically mobile people but a great majority who are, based on the evidence from our ethnography, still on the edges of accessing new technologies and their transformative potential. In the UK we have a population still highly differentiated in their access to and attitudes toward new technologies. Some older people may never move far into this new world. Many of their children will do so, to an extent unimaginable to their parents.

A recurrent theme in the Lancaster interviews concerns peoples' experiences of situations in their day-to-day life that had motivated them to develop a specialised expertise. These experiences launch them into new areas of learning in which they muster all the resources they can find, including literacy. Often these activities involve encounters with social institutions, dealing with professionals, ways of communicating, acting and understanding that were quite alien to peoples previous experience. To interact with these institutions and to have access to the knowledge they control, literacy is a key tool.

Deliberate investigations of unknown topics include those to do with ill health where people become expert in the treatment and understanding of particular ailments; encounters with schools, where parents act as advocates on behalf of their children and deal with educational systems which they find quite mystifying and opaque. There were a number of examples in our data related to employment-related problems such as searching for and applying for jobs, dealing with official bureaucracy when registering as unemployed, claiming welfare benefit entitlements or tax refunds; and setting up small businesses. Another common group of practical problems are legal problems involving encounters with the police, courts and insurance companies. A variety of legal problems and consumer grievances arise for individuals at different stages of their lives, and sometimes more general issues affect large groups of people, as in disputes over land ownership and use. In these cases, people may act together to pool resources and develop new kinds of expertise.

As well as these short-term responses to urgent practical needs, people have pre-occupations and pastimes which they pursue over lengthy periods: quests for information about family history, correspondences and leisure activities of various sorts. These leads to a wide variation in what people know about, and it is revealing to look across a community to investigate the types of vernacular knowledge which exist - as Luis Moll has done in his research with Mexican-American households in the United States. Moll (1994) refers to funds of knowledge in communities which are the practical exchanges and responses to needs for information and resources shared across families, between siblings, neighbours, friends. Moll found funds of knowledge in areas such as agriculture, economics, construction, religion, arts and repair. In Lancaster the areas of vernacular knowledge which we have identified include home economics and budgeting, repair and maintenance, child care, sports, gardening, cooking, pets and animal care, and family and local history. Some people had also developed knowledge of legal, political, health and medical topics.

Ian Falk refers to these funds of knowledge and the processes whereby they are created and circulated within a community as a part of "social capital" : "networks, norms and trust that facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit" (see Falk and Harrison, 1998: 613; Falk and Balatti, 1999). From his research with community-based groups in Australia, Falk has begun to identify the informal processes whereby knowledge is created and circulated, such as organizing forums for discussion of issues; working collectively in groups; encouraging wide participation among community members, including volunteers, making routes for people to develop and move into new positions; "passing the torch on" to subsequent generations of activists, dividing tasks up into short, recognisable and acheivable goals and stages and making results of activities publicly visible and celebrated (Falk and Harrison, 1998: 619).

Developing notions of "vernacular" and "institutional " literacies.

How can we better describe the learning that takes place outside of formal institutions where more fluid, and roles/subject positions, goals, procedures are not necessarily settled or named? One of the main organizing ideas that we used in the "Local Literacies" study was a distinction between dominant (institutionalised) and vernacular (self-generated) literacies. This has a parallel with James Gee's notion of "primary" and "secondary" Discourses and raises some of the same issues (Gee 1990). Vernacular and institutional literacies are not independent and for ever separated categories of activity but they are in dialogue and the boundaries between them are permeable and shifting.

We defined dominant literacies as those which are associated with formal organisations, such as those of the school, the church the work-place, the legal system, commerce, medical and welfare bureaucracies. They are part of the specialised discourses of bounded communities of practice, and are standardised and defined in terms of the formal purposes of the institution, rather than in terms of the multiple and shifting purposes of individual citizens and their communities. In dominant literacies there are professional experts and teachers through whom access to knowledge is controlled. To the extent that we can group these dominant literacies together, they are given high value, legally and culturally. Dominant literacies are powerful in proportion to the power of the institution that shapes them.

Vernacular literacies are essentially ones which are not regulated or systematised by the formal rules and procedures of social institutions but have their origin in the purposes of everyday life. They are not highly valued by formal social institutions though sometimes they develop in response to these institutions. They may be actively disapproved of and trivialised and they can be contrasted with dominant literacies which are seen as rational and of high cultural value.

They are more common in private spheres than in public spheres. Often they are humorous, playful, disrespectful, sometimes deliberately oppositional. When questioned about them, people did not always regard them as real reading or real writing. Some vernacular literacies are deliberately hidden: these include those which are personal and private, where reading or writing are ways of being alone and private, ways of creating personal space. There are also secret notes and letters of love, abuse, criticism and subversion, comics, scurrilous jokes, horoscopes, fanzines, pornography - some but not all of which will be revealed to the researcher's gaze. These findings link in with a range of other research which explores the informal literacies of different age groups. See, for example, Mahiri, 1999 who has documented the uses of literacy in the popular culture of black youth in California; Falk and Harrison, 1998; Falk and Balatti, 1999; Lankshear and Knobel, 1999; Princeloo and Breier, 1996.

In our project we found vernacular literacies involved in a range of everyday activities, which we roughly classified as (1) organising life (2) personal communication (3) private leisure (4) documenting life (5) sense making and (6) social participation. In all of these areas, we found examples of people becoming expert, consciously carrying out their own research on a topic of interest to them.

A number of points can be made about the nature of vernacular literacies based on the data from the Lancaster study.

Firstly, vernacular literacy practices are learned informally. They are acquired in homes and neighbourhood groups, through the everyday perplexities and curiosities of our lives. The roles of novice or learner and expert or teacher are not fixed, but shift from context to context and there is an acceptance that people will engage in vernacular literacies in different ways, sometimes supporting, sometimes requiring support from others. Identities shift accordingly.

Secondly, the vernacular literacy practices we identified are rooted in action contexts and everyday purposes and networks. They draw upon and contribute to vernacular knowledge, which is often local, procedural and minutely detailed. Literacy learning and use are integrated in everyday activities and the literacy elements are an implicit part of the activity, which may be mastering a martial art, paying the bills, organizing a musical event or finding out about local news. Literacy itself is not a focus of attention, but is used to get other things done. Everyday literacies are subservient to the goals of purposeful activities and are defined by people in terms of these activities.

Where specialisms develop in everyday contexts they are different from the formal academic disciplines, reflecting the logic of practical application. Vernacular literacies are as diverse as social practices are. They are hybrid in origin part of a "Do-It-Yourself" culture and often it is clear that a particular activity may be classified in more than one way since people may have a mixture of motives for taking part in a given literacy activity. Preparing a residents association newsletter, for instance, can be a social activity, it can be part of leisure or political activity, and it may involve personal sense-making. They are part of a "Do-It-Yourself" culture that incorporates whatever materials and resources are available and combines them in novel ways. Spoken language, print and other media are integrated; literacy is integrated with other symbolic systems, such as numeracy, and visual semiotics. Different topics and activities can occur together, making it hard to identify the boundaries of a single literacy event or practice.This is in contrast to many school practices, where learning is separated from use, divided up into academically defined subject areas, disciplines and specialisms, and where knowledge is often made explicit within particular interactive routines, is reflected upon, and is open to evaluation through the testing of disembedded skills.

As a starting point the distinction between "vernacular" and "institutional" knowing has been a useful but it needs to be further developed, especially in terms of the dialogic relationship between the two, how the one influences and articulates with the other. One way forward is to look to other strands of theorising that are concerned to understand the process of "knowing" as mediated, situated, provisional , pragmatic and contested. These strands include activity theory (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger,1998; Engstrom 1993;) where learning is seen in terms of initiation into a community of practice involving apprentice-like relationships between expert and novice members of that community; feminist theory that foregrounds the role of personal experience and the "knowing subject" in creating theory (Ramazanoglu and Holland 1997); and organizational learning theory, including "actor network" theory (as reviewed by Blackler, 1995; Law and Hassard,1999) that focuses on the interconnected institutional systems and environments within which knowing is achieved.

Casting an eye over these related areas reveals that the New Literacy Studies is just one part of a growing recognition that "knowing" is not simply the product of individualised skills and understandings but a relational, social process. Neither is knowing simply a cognitive matter but it simultaneously involves other modes of engaging with the world. We can, for example, identify at least the following (adapted from Blackler 1995):

embodied knowing which is experiental and action oriented, dependent on peoples' physical presence, on sensory processes, physical cues, and may be only partially explicit
symbolic knowing which is mediated by conceptual understandings which are explicit, propositional and encoded through a variety of semiotic technologies - spoken language, and other symbol systems, print and electronic communications
embedded knowing which is procedural, shaped or engrooved by practical routines which are configurations of material, technological and social symbolic resources through which knowing is accomplished
encultured knowing which is involves the shared understandings that are achieved through social relationships and initiation into communities of practice.

Some of these modes of knowing are more explicit, abstract and portable, some are much more closely tied to physical localities and individual subjectivities and they of course vary enormously in the relative value that is accorded to them in different contexts. However, they are all present and affect eventual outcomes.

A further elaboration of learning that is needed is to explore the features of different "communities of practice", the processes that go on within them and the resources they draw on (including the physical and material environment) and how people engage with them.

Within the communit(ies) we have studied, technical literacy skills are unevenly distributed and people may participate in literacy practices in many different ways. However, as the Lancaster research has shown, what counts as "expert" and what is "novice" is problematic outside of an institutional setting. People move flexibly in and out of being "learners" in different roles, notions of exchange and identity are strongly linked.

The notion of apprenticeship does not fit all situations and we need a more fluid conceptualisation of the relationships experienced outside of institutional settings. Stephen Reder's notion of practice engagement theory (Reder 1994) may point a way toward this more fluid characterisation. He identifies three aspects of literacy practices - the technologies of reading and writing, the functions of these activities, and the social meanings carried by them - and suggests that people may engage with any or all of these three aspects in shifting, and often unequal ways. Reder's formulation could be integrated with the different modes of engagement identified above.

Creating "Truths" about Literacy

So far this paper has discussed ways of developing a fuller notion of vernacular literacies, based on a detailed database of ethnographic research. But to make use of this notion of vernacular knowing and literacy we also need to understand more about how institutions produce and priviledge certain kinds of knowing as "real knowledge", how they produce and recognise "experts", and how, in this process they devalue or re-define the vernacular for their own purposes – a process that Wenger (1999:57) refers to as "reification". Much more thought needs to be given to the nature of lay expertise and its relationship to identity and to professional expertise and competence, the tensions between these. What is acceptable as "expertise" in informal and in institutional settings? What are the significant dimensions of expertise in each case that contribute to a persons credibility (e.g. richness of their knowledge base, institutional affiliations, ability to communicate effectively, breadth of perspective, ability to make links between formal and informal networks).

In this section I offer some thoughts about how such an enquiry might proceed. This part of the paper is more speculative, as it projects a research agenda, rather than reporting on work already done.

To achieve an understanding of how institutional truths about literacy as created, I suggest that we need to focus less on what the teachers and learners are doing (or need to do) and more on what the adminstrators, assessors, quality inspectors and government agencies and policy-makers are doing in relation to literacy and lifelong learning. That is, our attention and analytic effort has to move to the intersection between policy and learning theory. We should be concerned to make links between the theoretical insights offered by the NLS and the public discourses of literacy which inform educational policy and practice – and which in turn enter into popular understandings about literacy.

To give a specific example, we should be doing more to contest the solidifying international "regimes of truth" that are developing through standardised assessment and testing —which are, in their turn, organizing national and local knowledge about what literacy is. Surveys such as the (IALS) International Adult Literacy Survey (OECD 1997) organize our knowledge about literacy and the "literate subject". They are based on a particular set of social relations and institutions which have both national and international dimensions, residing in government, academic and media domains. Such surveys increasingly underpin, model, elaborate and justify educational and policy decisions about funding and pedagogy and they are a prime example of what Gee (1999:191) has identified as "enactive and recognition work " – an attempt to get other people to recognise people and things as having certain meanings and values with certain configurations or relationships. The surveys draw on a particular discipline - the psychometric measurement tradition - which is dedicated to the search for universal certainties about the relation between literacy, economy and society. They use an information processing model of literacy and attempt to identify levels of literacy skill that are independent of the context of use – the literacy counterpart of the labour skills supposedly possessed by the flexible worker.

Darville (1999) and Hamilton and Barton (2000) have argued that these surveys fit well within the globalising project of the new capitalism. They are re-defining literacy to fit in with the projected needs of an ideal, consumer-oriented citizen who is responsive to multiple new contexts for literacy use. They justify a vision of what literacy should be, rather than being based on peoples lived experiences. These activities continue to be developed with large sums of research money provided by the governments of OECD Countries. I would argue that this is not a democratic project, but an institutional vision that has little to do with supporting people to use and control literacy for their own purposes. It is

important that we reveal the institutional underpinnings and aspirations for IALS, rather than treating the findings from surveys like this as indisputable facts about contemporary life.

Theoretical tools are already available for exploring the ways in which institutions exercise and realise power: from Foucault (1982); from Bernstein (1998) on how knowledge is re-framed within a pedagogical discourse when it is imported into an educational context; and from Wenger (1999) on the characteristics of institutional communities of practice. Foucault (1982:223), for example, has identified five institutional "shaping processes": systems of differentiation that define the status of people who have the authority to "know"; definition of objectives that shape what each person expects to do and how to act in relation to others; processes that offer incentives for compliance with power relations either through force, economics or surveillance systems; management structures for decision-making, disseminating information and mobilising resources; and finally the legitimisation process, whereby rationales are offered for the exercise of institutional power.

Methodological tools are also available (for example in actor network theory) which would enable us to trace the threads of an initiative such as the IALS through its creation and dispersion from research contexts to media, policy and practice (see Law and Hassard (1999). These would help us analyse how literacies are embedded in the institutional relationships and processes that give them their meaning and how vernacular literacies are defined in relation to dominant, legitimated practices.

Supporting Literacies through LifeLong Learning Policy

The fact that some literacies are supported, controlled and legitimated by powerful institutions implies that others are de-valued. Many of the literacies that are influential and valued in people's day-to-day lives, that are widely circulated and discussed are also ignored by educational institutions: they do not count as "real" literacy. Neither are the informal social networks which sustain these literacies drawn upon or acknowledged.

A lifelong learning strategy for literacy can be driven by the needs of institutions or it can genuinely sustain and develop the resources, process and purposes that already exist in civic life. There are many pressures that push literacy policy toward the institutional version. However, at its roots the ideal of life long learning has a humanitarian agenda which demands an authentic, democratic response. I have argued in this paper that the research approach offered by the New Literacy Studies provides a framework from which to develop such a response in relation to literacy and we can begin to sketch the outlines of this.

Key to the response is that we need to take a "systems" approach: it is not possible to separate the individual from the context and resources implicated in their learning. So, we should see a lifelong literacy funding strategy as designing environments that can supplement community resources and funds of knowledge (see also The New London Group, 2000; Hautecoeur, 1997). A social practice approach to literacy demonstrates the changing demands that people experience at different stages of their lives and offers convincing evidence of the need for lifelong learning systems which people can access at critical points. Whilst community resources and funds of knowledge exist, they also have their limitations. They are often are unevenly distributed and can be supported by various kinds of educational response. From this perspective, formally structured learning opportunities are one important component of lifelong learning, but they are only one aspect of a solution to sustaining literacies. The focus needs to be wider. Literacy/lifelong learning funds could be used to

- increase the physical spaces available for people and groups to meet/exchange ideas/display/perform
- strengthen access points for literacy : libraries/cyber cafes/bookshops/advice centres etc so that citizens can access information they are searching for through print, video, electronic forms etc, engage in virtual or actual meetings with experts
- strengthen open local government structures that facilitate consultation and access to existing routes for change/citizen action
- support local media which help circulate and publicise news, events, space for debating issues, ideas
- provide structured opportunities to learn both content and process skills and link up with others interested in the same issues.

In developing this strategy, we have to pay serious attention to the social relationships which frame literacy in schools, colleges, classrooms and other learning groups, and the power dimensions of these relationships in terms of the ability to make decisions, confer value, demonstrate expertise. So long as these relationships remain unexamined and untouched, there is very little possibility that literacies can be sustained within a system of lifelong learning.

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